

PLAIN MAGIC

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Only once in my life was I glad that my family was large. Until I was fourteen the tale of my days was one of hand-me-down clothes and toys that barely lasted a month by the time they reached me, and a place to spread my blankets on the floor between my older sisters' beds. Then came the news that the dragon that had been destroying towns to the north was just two days' flight away.

It was time to pack. Everyone had to choose what might be carried to the caves in the mountains and what must be left behind.

With a houseful of frightened older girls and their children—my sisters were married, living with us until their men could build homes of their own—my mother had no use for me. After she had ordered me out of the way for the third time, she thrust bread and cheese into my hands and told me to go.

"Don't stray from the village," she ordered. "Who knows where that dragon is?"

I thought that we would know if he was near, since he was supposed to be as big as three bulls, but nobody argued with my mother. I put my food in a string bag and left our house.

At first I thought I would go to the woods, as I liked to do, but my father saw me and told me to stay close to home. Then I went in search of my friends. All of them had been put to work packing, getting ready to run when the dragon came. Bored and lonely, I wandered into the village and found an unexpected arrival. A peddler had come and had set up in the square across from the fountain.

Her cart was scarlet with designs picked out in yellow paint on the wheels. One whole side of the cart was lowered to form a broad tray. On it were neatly stacked goods: bolts of cloth in a dozen colors, neat rolls of beautiful lace, cloth dolls as small as my fingers or as big as my hand, spools of thread, and balls of yarn. The peddler had placed a wooden bench next to the tray. She sat there, busily embroidering a square of cloth.

She wasn't much to look at—brown and dry and thin, with dark hair tied back under a scarf. Her dress was plain brown cotton with small, dark buttons. She wore skirts as short as a girl my age, hanging just a few inches below the knee. They revealed scuffed, flat-heeled boots, as well-worn and dusty as everything else about her. I guessed her age at a little over thirty.

There was a dragon coming, maybe, but it was still my lucky day. Normally my parents frowned on my speaking to people who came from the big world outside our village, but they were busy. I could talk to this stranger all I wanted.

I told her my name, Tonya. She gave me hers, Lindri. I asked about what she had to sell, and she answered. She even showed me the silks she kept tucked away in the cart, for customers with fatter purses than our villagers had. The silks came from odd-sounding places, where the dyes were ten times more vivid than any we had. Lindri had been to those lands. She described them so beautifully I could almost see them.

She embroidered as she talked. Her needle darted through the cloth as if it were alive, shaping a garden of flowers on what would be a sleeve. I had never been very interested in needlework, but Lindri made it seem fascinating. I didn't realize I was staring at the design until she patted my cheek smartly, waking me from a daze.

"Don't watch so long," she said with a grin. "They say there's a plain kind of magic in needlework—do you want to end up a slave to it, like me?"

I winced. "Don't talk of magic or slavery to me," I growled. "I've no idea of what I'm doing, but people here still keep asking me for charms for everything under the sun."

Lindri raised her brows. "You have magic?"

I nodded.

"Surely your teacher is showing you how to work."

I laughed, bitterness choking me. “Wizard Halen? It’s like pulling teeth to get him to teach me what little I *do* know. He’s so afraid I’ll be better than him that he won’t even teach me to read.”

We continued to talk about non-magical things. When the noon hour came, I shared my bread and cheese with Lindri, who added some apples, jam made of a berry I had never tasted before, and mugs of cider.

While we ate, four-year-old Krista emerged from her house across the square. Bit by bit she wandered closer as we finished our meal. At last she reached the lowered tray. She stared at the brightly colored balls of yarn, with her finger in her half-open mouth, as if the balls held the answer to some great secret.

Lindri smiled at her. “Hello, young one. Can I do something for you?”

Krista was shy. She turned to run, stumbled, and fell with a shriek. When I picked her up, I had to bite my lip to keep from gasping. She had cut her palm on a rock in the street. The bones of her hand showed through the deep, ugly gash.

“Hush, hush.” Lindri took the screaming Krista from me, brushing her off with an efficient hand. “So much noise. Let me see.”

To my surprise, Krista stopped wailing. She held the bleeding hand up for Lindri to examine. Blood welled thickly from the cut, and I shivered with fear. Rot was almost impossible to avoid with such a deep wound. The chances were that pretty Krista would lose her hand.

“That’s bad, I suppose,” Lindri said. “But it could be a lot worse.” She took the girl to a water barrel fixed to the rear of the cart, holding Krista’s hand beneath the spout as she rinsed the wound clean. She whisked a strip of linen from the piles on the tray and sat down, settling Krista in her lap.

“If you’re brave about this,” Lindri told her, “you may have one of the red balls of yarn for your very own.”

Krista stuck the fingers of her good hand in her mouth and held out the injured hand. Lindri bandaged the cut neatly and quickly. She finished by tying the loose ends in an oddly shaped knot directly over the wound, tapping the knot lightly with her fingers when she was done.

“All fixed,” she told Krista, putting a crimson ball of yarn into the child’s good hand. “Keep the bandage clean, mind. When you take it off you’ll be as good as new.”

As Krista ran home I frowned at Lindri. It would be rude for me to say so to an adult, but I thought it was cruel for Lindri to lie to Krista. The

child would know it was a lie when she could no longer use the hand, or worse, was forced to have it cut off.

Lindri smiled at me. "You'll see that I'm right," she said, as if she knew what I had been thinking. "Now, tell me about the dragon who's been preying on this valley."

No one could have disobeyed the soft note of command in Lindri's voice. "It first attacked villages below the northern mountains," I began. "That was about two weeks ago. It's been coming south ever since. It doesn't burn every town in its way, but it's burned enough. People who flee it come through here because we're the last village before the pass out of the valley. But you'd know that if you came up from the south."

"That's right," Lindri replied. "I drove through the pass this morning."

Mistress Fane, the miller's wife, came up to us and pointed to a bolt of cloth. "I'd like to see more of that, if you please," she ordered Lindri. The woman could never ask for anything politely.

"No one knows why it burns some villages and not others," I went on as Mistress Fane inspected another bolt of cloth, and a third. "It was spotted near here two days ago, but we don't know if it'll attack us or not. Everyone hopes it will just go away."

Mistress Fane bought the pink cloth she had been looking at, which filled me with glee. She looked awful in pink.

Lindri picked up her embroidery again. "Why are your people still here?"

"We're too poor," I told her. It felt odd to say such things to a stranger—I was very proud—but Lindri had a listening way about her. I went on as I watched her needle flash through her cloth. "All most of us have is our farms. We can't take them with us, and we've no money to start fresh someplace else." I sighed. "I'd *like* to start someplace else."

Lindri glanced at me. "Adventurous, are you, Tonya?"

I felt as if she'd taken a leash off my tongue. Out spilled my dreams of leaving the valley someday, of seeing new lands and meeting new people, of simply being somewhere *different*. Then I remembered. I was Tonya, the headman's daughter. The only place I was likely to go to was my future husband's home. It was silly to talk of my dreams to Lindri, who had seen the world beyond the mountains. It was silly and it was senseless, because soon she would leave, and I would still be here.

"Where are you going now?" I asked.

She looked at the sun, which slid toward the western horizon, and traded her embroidery for knitting. "North," she replied briefly. "To the mountains, I expect."

"You can't!" I protested, shocked. "It's dangerous. Wild animals live there. More dragons, and bears taller than a tall man, and giant cats—"

Lindri shrugged. "I like animals. They rarely bother you unless you bother them first."

I was about to argue further when Riv interrupted us. He had come in early from putting his sheep up for the night, probably to get news of the dragon. "Excuse me," he said politely, picking up a small square of folded lace. "I want to know how much this is."

Lindri looked him over. "One silver minim."

"For just this little bit?" Riv asked, eyeing the lace. It was beautiful, filmy white stuff. I had an idea that the price Lindri had given him was less than what she would charge somewhere else. He handed the square to her. "Hold this, please? I want to look at the rest." He went to the small stacks of lace at the far end of the tray.

"He seems like a nice young man," Lindri remarked softly. "What can you tell me about him?"

"He's getting married next month," I whispered, keeping an eye on Riv. "His girl Aura is my best friend. She's standing over by the fountain, the one with the basket on her arm. Riv's chief shepherd, but he hasn't been chief through a spring shearing, so he hasn't any money. And all Aura ever wanted was a lace veil when she marries, like the city ladies have."

Lindri was tugging on the edges of the lace Riv had given her, which worried me. What if she got it dirty?

"Nobody else here got a lace veil," I went on. "So people say Aura thinks she's better than everyone else. But it's not true! She just wants something pretty."

Riv came back. "See anything you'd rather have?" Lindri asked.

He offered her a silver minim, his face beet-colored with shame. "No. This is fine." He was trying to smile, but it didn't look right. "It isn't a whole veil, but—well, it's very pretty," he finished.

Lindri pocketed the coin and gave Riv the folded square. "Enjoy it," she told Riv, smiling. "And may your marriage be happy."

Boys had come to set torches around the square. The whole village would be coming here soon, to get the latest news of the dragon. As the

torches caught, they threw their wavering light over Riv as he walked back to Aura.

"It's just not fair," I muttered as he offered her the lace. "Old, mean people like Miller Fane and his wife have nice things, but Aura and Riv—"

Riv fumbled the lace and caught it just in time. Then the lace began to unfold, and I gasped. Length after length spilled from Riv's hands like a waterfall, shimmering white in the glow from the torches. Riv had to raise his hands higher and higher to keep the white stuff from touching the ground, while Aura laughed and cried at the same time.

They tried to make Lindri take it back, but she refused. "That's the piece you bought," she told Riv firmly. "Ask Tonya if it ever left my hands after you gave it to me."

And that was the biggest puzzle of all. I had talked to her the whole time, and the only thing she did with that lace was tug on it. I *knew* it had been a folded square of one or two thicknesses when Riv selected it, but I couldn't prove it. They went away at last, Aura crying on Riv's shoulder as he carefully refolded the lace.

Lindri shook her head, straightening the goods on her tray. "People should inspect strange goods carefully," she murmured. "They never know what they've purchased, otherwise."

I was about to ask what Riv *had* bought when my father came as the village headman to meet Lindri. The other two elders, Priest Rand and my teacher, Wizard Halen, soon joined us. As Rand said polite things to Lindri, Halen started to inspect her wares. Suddenly he picked up a square of linen. "There is something odd about this piece," he began.

Lindri snatched it from his fingers. "Don't touch unless you plan to buy," she snapped. "No one buys dirty goods."

Wizard Halen's eyes narrowed. He was about to speak when my brother Selm galloped into the square. Normally Selm was calm and slow-going, but when he reined up before our father, he was in as much of a lather as his horse.

"I saw it settle on Tower Rock!" he gasped. "Long and bronze, like we were told!"

People came quickly to the square as the word spread until everyone was there, including my entire family, Riv, Aura, my other friends, and Krista and her parents. Miller Fane and his wife arrived with their horse-drawn cart—the only one in the village—piled high with their things. They could afford to run, to start fresh somewhere else.

Everyone listened as my father, the priest, and the wizard explained the problem for what seemed like the thousandth time. Were there any choices but flight?

Wizard Halen said, "I may have found a way."

"Tell us, then," Tanner Clyd yelled.

Just then Krista's mother saw the bandage on her girl's hand was dirty and bedraggled. I watched her tug at the strange knot Lindri had used. At last she gave up trying to undo the knot and cut it with her belt knife.

"I have read the various remedies for a plague of dragons," Halen said loudly. His squeaky voice quavered with the effort.

Of course, I thought unhappily. He's been at his precious books. We had fought so often over his teaching me to read that I had finally given up asking.

Halen went on, "A spear made of silver, of course, wielded by a virtuous man—"

Someone called, "If there was enough silver here to make a spear, Wizard, you'd have had it all by now."

My father scowled. "The wizard is trying to aid us," he said. "Listen to him."

Halen looked smug. "A dragon may also be lured to its death in a pit of fire, or buried in a river of ice." He tugged his nose for a moment. "But there is a fourth way to placate a dragon, and I have found it at last."



"Is it as impossible as the others?" Miller Fane wanted to know. "There are no pits of fire or rivers of ice here!"

People muttered agreement. Halen waited until they were quiet before he replied, "It is not impossible, but it is costly. You may think it better to flee."

"Where will we go?" Krista's mother cried. She stopped unwinding the bandage from her daughter's palm. "We have lived here for generations! No one has the coin to build new homes!"

Everyone shouted agreement.

"You must give the dragon something," Halen announced. "You must assuage his hunger."

"Oh, no," Lindri whispered tiredly.

I missed Halen's next words because I was staring at Krista. Her mother had the bandage off at last. She was turning the little one's palm back and forth in the torchlight, trying to see the cut. So was I. The ugly gash that had marred Krista's hand when Lindri bandaged it was gone.

"... a young girl," I heard Wizard Halen say. "Unmarried. A virgin."

Everyone was silent. To offer the beast one of our own ... A woman began to cry.

"You must draw lots," Halen went on. "You must be fair."

"Drivel." Everyone turned to stare at Lindri, who stood beside her cart, hands on hips. "Absolute nonsense. Do you seriously think a dragon can taste the difference between a virgin and an old man?"

"You are a stranger here," Miller Fane called. "Speak to our wizard with respect."

"Your wizard doesn't know what he's talking about," Lindri told him calmly and clearly. "Dragons hate the taste of human flesh."

"Legend is filled with the sacrifices made to dragons!" Halen was turning red. Just when he had everyone's attention and respect, this peddler-woman was trying to make him look like a fool.

"Of course they'll eat a human if a human is staked out like a goat," Lindri replied. "They aren't very smart. This one will eat your virgin, and then he'll be sick. A dragon flames only when he is ill. He'll pass over your homes because he has fed, and then he'll burn the next village he sees to the ground. You will have killed a girl needlessly, and others will die or lose their homes. All for the lack of a little sense on your part, *wizard*."

My father was dark with anger. "You have said more than enough," he told Lindri. "You are a guest, and Halen is an elder. Be silent, or our young men will see you on your way."

Lindri eyed my father for a moment, as if she could see through his face into his head. I was angry and ashamed. *I* knew what he was like but he was my father. What right did a stranger have to look at him as if he were a fool?

Lindri shrugged and sat down. My father stared at us, waiting for another sign of rebellion, then turned to Halen. "How young must they be?"

The wizard swelled with pride. Lindri had been silenced, and now everyone waited for him to tell us what to do. "They must be of marriageable age, and no younger than twelve," he announced.

There were just seven girls of that age—the village was very small. We seven were separated from the others as Carpenter Daws cut a rod into six long pieces and a short one. The wizard made a bag out of my mother's shawl, and the pieces were dumped inside. The priest said a prayer. Then we were told to each step up and take a piece of wood without looking. Lindri was silent, knitting busily.

I got the short piece. When I held it up, everyone looked at my father. They wanted to see if he would try to save me, either because I was his daughter or because after Halen I was the best magic worker in the village. They didn't know my father. I wish *I* hadn't known him as well as I did.

My mother was sobbing quietly. My sisters gathered around her and led her home. Not one of them met my eyes. I looked for my brothers and brothers-in-law in the crowd. They, too, looked away.

"Tonya is the one," my father said. "We will take her to the north meadow tomorrow and leave her there for the dragon."

Aura ran up to me and hugged me fiercely, weeping. I felt distant and strange, as I had since I had seen that short piece of wood. When Riv kissed my cheek and drew Aura away from me, I felt numbly glad. I knew I ought to say something, to them or the elders or someone, but I couldn't think.

Lindri came up to me and put a hand on my shoulder. "You're brave, Tonya," she whispered. "Be brave a while more." She returned to her cart, climbing inside and closing the door behind her.

My father, along with two of my brothers, took me to a shed by the north meadow for the rest of the night. Selm was the one who hesitated when they would have closed the door and locked me in.

"We don't want to do this," he said, almost as if he were pleading with me. "You're my sister, and I—" He seemed to think the better of telling

me he loved me. "We have to do this," he told me, hanging his head. "We've no choice." He closed the door. I heard the bolt slide home.

I lay awake all night, staring at the shadowy roof and listening to the men who guarded the shed. None of this felt real, not even the rocks that pressed into my back.

At last I could see bits of pale light through the cracks in the walls. My father, Halen, and Priest Rand came for me.

The post was already standing in the middle of the north meadow. They had found shackles somewhere and hung them from the post. The priest locked them around my hands, muttering a fast prayer as he kept an eye on distant Tower Rock. When a touch of sun showed over the horizon, they left me at the run and hid in the woods at the meadow's edge.

My numbness evaporated. Giddy with sudden fright, I faced Tower Rock and the humped form that sat on top of it. Once the monster's in the air, I thought, he'll be here fast. It'll be over before I can feel it.

At least, I prayed it would be so.

Then I heard the jingle of a horse's harness, the clop of hooves, and the creak of wood. Lindri stopped her cart a little way from me, and her piebald gelding¹ put his head down to graze. The elders yelled for her to get away from me, but they were too afraid to leave the protection of the trees to stop her.

Baffled, I stared at Lindri as she walked over to me. Little things about her struck me as suddenly very important. She was wearing a clean blue dress with white embroideries, and she had wiped yesterday's dust off her boots. She glanced at Tower Rock, her eyes as clear and alert as if she'd been up for hours. As the distant dragon unfurled its wings, Lindri gathered my shackles in her hands.

"This has gone far enough," she said, looking the chains over. "If they'd listened to me, you would have been spared a very bad night. I'm sorry for that."

She tapped each lock with her fingers, just as she had tapped the knot on Krista's bandage. The shackles sprang open. Then she pulled a length of twine from her pocket. "Go, Tonya. I'll tend to the dragon."

It was all too strange. I should have been frightened and hysterical. Instead I quivered with excitement. I went only as far as her cart to wait, stroking the piebald's nose and warming my cold hands in his mane. My father and the others were still shouting. I ignored them, just as Lindri had.

¹ **piebald gelding:** a neutered male horse with black and white spots or blotches

She faced north, looking just as calm as she had while we gossiped the day before. Only her fingers moved, tying multitudes of knots in her twine. They formed clumps that grew far greater than the amount of string I had seen her take out. Like Riv's lace, the knots spilled from her working hands to the ground in billows. As the dragon leaped into the air from Tower Rock, Lindri bent, gathered the masses of knots into her hands, and straightened.

I glanced back at the woods. Wizard Halen screamed curses, jumping up and down in a fury. My father was staring at Lindri, white-faced. The priest had fallen to his knees and was muttering prayers.

I turned in time to see the dragon as it glided low over the meadow, claws outstretched. Lindri waited until he was directly overhead. She crouched, then leaped, hurling her bundle of knots into the air. They spread until I could see clearly she had shaped a huge net. Like a living thing the net wrapped itself around the dragon, wings, snout, claws and all. The great lizard screeched with alarm as it tumbled to the ground, landing with a thump on the meadow.

As I looked on, the net drew itself tighter and tighter, pulling the dragon's limbs and wings close to its body. It was beautiful, long, and muscular, with copper-bronze scales, gold claws, and deep amber eyes. It was as long as two bulls and as big around as one—a far cry from the three-bull size that people had claimed for it. Pressing its wings against the clinging net, it cried softly, until I began to feel sorry for the thing that might have eaten me.

Lindri approached, tugging a fresh length of twine until it was a rope. Reaching through the net, she slid her rope around the dragon's neck, making a leash. The dragon stopped its struggle, rubbing its muzzle against Lindri's hands. She spoke to it quietly before she pulled her hands free of the net. Now the creature sat and waited, eyeing her curiously.

She grasped a thread of the net and tugged. The web of knotted string fell apart and shrank, leaving her holding only a piece of twine. She tucked that into her pocket and wound the free end of the dragon's leash around her wrist.

My father and the others had left the safety of the trees and were advancing warily. Lindri waited for them, rocking on her heels as the dragon butted her affectionately with its head.

"You tricked us!" Halen screeched when he was close enough that she could hear. "You never told us—" He couldn't seem to remember what

she hadn't told them. His face turned mottled purple as he opened and closed his mouth soundlessly.

"You didn't believe me when I told you something about their habits," Lindri said calmly as she rubbed the dragon's muzzle. The elders stopped twenty feet away from her, refusing to draw closer. "Would you have believed me if I told you about this?"

When they didn't answer, she led the dragon to her cart and hitched it at the back. The gelding looked at the lizard in a bored way, as if dragons always brought up the rear.

Perhaps dragons always did.

"What will you do with it now?" My father sounded nervous. I looked away from him. Any love I felt for him had gone in the night, but I hated to see him trying to be humble to her now. "We meant you no harm—"

Lindri climbed onto the driver's seat of her cart and picked up the reins. "He's lost," she said briefly. "I'm taking him home to his mountains."

"Lost?" Halen whispered.

"He would never have come this far if he hadn't been lost in the first place." Her mouth curled scornfully. "Neither would he have done so much damage if folk like you hadn't insisted on feeding him their children." She looked down at me. "Why don't you come with me, Tonya? I'll take you someplace where you can get a proper magical education."

I seized the edge of her seat. "I don't want to learn someplace else," I told her. "I want to study with you. I want to learn what *you* can teach me."

Lindri raised her brows, her gray eyes puzzled. "This? It's just plain magic, Tonya. Nothing spectacular."

I glanced at the dragon following the cart, attached only by what had once been a piece of string. He—she had said it was a he—nibbled curiously at the wooden step under the rear door. "It's spectacular enough," I told her.

Lindri laughed. Suddenly I could see she wasn't old at all—she was barely a handful more of years older than I. "Come up, then," she said, offering her hand. "What I have to teach you, I will." 